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MEAN AL a.k.a. "Daddy"

Alvin Gilcrist[1]

For me, forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?

- bell hooks

I am known as a good father, a respectful neighbor, an excellent employee, and a nice man who shops at local stores. I was also once known as "Mean Al," the meanest man in Washington State's toughest prison.[2]

In 1974 I escaped from a Washington State prison van, making front page news as I led law enforcement officials on a two-week foot race.[3] I was nineteen-years-old by two days and the subsequent conviction for my escape resulted in a life sentence.[4] One legendary radio commentator told the world that I had beaten holes in the walls of my prison cell, one so big that it allowed me to climb out and take a guard hostage for a bag lunch and a sack of cookies.[5] In 1975 I had the distinction of being the youngest person in Washington State history to be sentenced as a habitual criminal.[6]

Then, early one morning in 1979, the Walla Walla penitentiary was placed on lock-down as riot-suited guards crashed into my cell and chained me up for a midnight transfer to another prison. I eventually landed in Marion, Illinois, in a federal prison built to replace the notorious Alcatraz and used to confine the hardest of the hard. I was twenty-two-years-old, making me the youngest soul in there. While there, I received a second sentence, which amounted to a term of double life.[7]

Today, I am known to the kids in the neighborhood as Cheyenne's Dad. All the neighborhood kids come to our home to jump on the trampoline, or to admire my daughter's room, which is complete with various amenities thanks to a recent birthday present from the family. Although painting her room purple and setting up the new (used) computer was a lot of work, it was all worth it when this tired father heard his little girl say her room was "perfect."

Now I am liked at the grocery store where they often see me and my daughter shopping. I take my daughter along and buy this and that; I like it and my wife does too. Now I am liked at the post office, where I buy money orders to pay bills; when there are long delays, I am patient and friendly and the postal clerk thanks me for my consideration.

No one in this community knows much about me, except that I am a nice guy, neighborly, and a good father. They do not know I am an ex-convict who was once known as Mean Al. I am not sure that I would be greeted too kindly if they did. I am not sure they believe in redemption and change like I do. I believe that forgiveness and compassion are inextricably linked, and I believe that these two seemingly ancient paradigms are just as applicable today as they once were.

My name is Alvin Gilcrist. I know a little bit about incarceration, redemption, forgiveness, and compassion. I have served over thirty-three years of my life in prison. While serving that time, I saw it all. As a result, I know that most prisoners do not like their lifestyle and would, if given the right circumstances and help, strive to become better citizens.[8]

In 1972, at age sixteen, I began serving adult prison time.[9] I was released in 1991,[10] and within fifteen months I was back inside for parole violations.[11] I did not gain my current release until September 2005. People were very angry at me for my failures in the early nineties. There was little compassion; people could not understand how a smart guy like me could fail so badly.

I hardly understood it myself. I did not want to return to prison, not just because I did not want to be in a cage, but because I did not want to break the law. I wanted to remain in the community as a good citizen and I wanted to feel as if I were contributing to my community. I wanted to be respected and liked. I did not want friends, family, and others to be disappointed in me. But things happen and years of prison life had deeply embedded in me self-destructive tendencies. At the first sign of problems, I reacted to the stress and frustration by seeking the comfort of old friends and drugs.

In prison I learned how to adapt to brutality and I did it well. One newspaper columnist wrote about my early incarceration, opining that I did not just survive, I prevailed.[12] Just like some Vietnam veterans who returned home directly from a jungle war, when I returned home I was not equipped for a gentle community life, even though it was in me to live that way. It is a sad fact, but like women who remain in abusive relationships, I was locked into a psychological mind set from which I had no egress; not one that I could see at the time anyway. All I knew how to be was hard—how to run *through* road blocks rather than manuever around them.

And what was society to do when I violated my parole? I had guns and I was using drugs. Surely something had to be done. More prison time? How much more time? Fourteen more years? How could fourteen more years in lockup improve my character or rehabilitate me any more effectively than the previous nineteen?

In the 1970s, the Washington State Penitentiary was one of the most violent prisons in the country, and unlike today, teenagers were rarely sent to that prison. But there I was. Faced with the prospect of being a casualty of prison violence, I decided to climb the ladder. I prevailed. I adapted. As I used to say, I became an animal in order to be treated like a human. Some individuals will bury their heads in the sand, others will thrust themselves into the governing structure, and some will strive to excel in the new environment. While in lockup, when one peers into the abyss, it does

indeed stare back. As a result of looking into the abyss and considering what stared back at me, I learned many things during my incarcerations.[13]

A friend once told me that the primary problem public and prison officials face when considering the need to return allegedly rehabilitated prisoners to their communities is recognizing that the prison environment itself may have destroyed all that was good in certain prisoners. My friend illustrated his point with an example based on my own incarcertaion. My friend identified many of my good characteristics, and many of my bad behaviors that were exacerbated by prison conditions and circumstances. That was a long time ago.

When the time came for my current release, I asked myself many questions: How do I find my place given what I have done? Do I have a place? Is there compassion and forgiveness for me? The answers were not immediately clear, and some remain unanswered. People have different opinions. Those who remain angry at me for my past deeds are justified. I sincerely and wholeheartedly acknowledge this. I *was* the meanest man in Washington State. It is not reasonable for me to demand forgiveness, even though that is what I seek. Although I would like these individuals to understand some things about who I am now, they are entitled to their judgment and they owe me no compassion. Regardless, I continue to wish for it, and I believe that showing compassion is ultimately what is best for the community.

I really want to make it out here and this time I believe I will. I have learned a great deal since my last release, and things have changed dramatically in my life. I have a daughter. I have a wife. I realize that I remain capable of failing if I do not take care each and every day to avoid the triggers that can pull me back, however subtly, into a life of drugs and illegal acts. This is a truth that is hard to admit. Years of an outlaw lifestyle have molded my being so deeply. As a result, there will always be inclinations and tendenicies that I will have to struggle to overcome.

Despite these ingrained tendencies, I am armed with something different this time around. Fear will help me prevail. While I have rarely feared anything in my life, today I am afraid that I will let my daughter down. I also fear I might disappoint those who have helped me: my friends, extended family, my wife, and others in the community who have spent their time and love in an effort to help me. I am a hardened guy and I continue to have some concerns about making it out here; but unlike before, I have a little girl who needs her daddy. And, this time around I am surrounded by a great deal of compassion and forgivness.

This is all relevant to understanding the link between forgiveness and compassion. Before there can be compassion for anyone, there must be some understanding of where the person came from, and what contributed to the actions that may require forgiveness. One cannot forgive without feeling compassion. Compassion does not, in any way, mean that the forgiven actions are condoned. Compassion means being able to sympathize, or maybe even empathize, with all of the factors that may have brought an individual to the place and time in their lives where they committed the illegal acts. As the perpetrator develops remorse for past conduct and begins to take tangible steps towards change, the perpetrator will likely seek or desire redemption. While this happens, both the victim and society may be able to begin feeling compassion for the perpetrator. It is the ability to feel compassion that opens the door to the ability to forgive.

I believe that compassion and forgiveness are inextricably linked because it is important for me, and people like me, to feel that those who judge us will eventually welcome us back into the community; not only as someone who lives and works there, but as a full member of the community. This transformation requires forgiveness because one has to forgive to be able to grant honest and full access to one's community.

Again, compassion and forgivness does ***not*** mean that one must condone past actions. It does mean, however, if I am worthy of compassion and forgiveness as a result of my efforts that my fellow community members

will let me know that I am welcome and allowed to participate in the community just like everyone else. If I am not welcome and allowed to participate in the community as an equal, then I am a second class citizen that remains separate from the whole.

Denying me forgiveness and compassion does not help the community, my neighbors, my familiy and friends, my daughter, or myself. Although I adapted to the rigors of prison life and became the most violent of the violent, I always retained the ability to love and be loving; I have always felt compassion for the elderly, the sick, and the needy. I never forgot how to hug a child, or how to be kind to others around me. I never pass a stranded motorist because I understand what it feels like to need help or assistance and to have it denied. I care about people and I want nothing more than to live a decent life. I do, however, need help with my efforts. I have always needed help, but I have not always gotten it.

It was always in me to be a good father, husband, and neighbor. But I am a person who, for whatever reason, developed a lifestyle and mindset that was destructive to our society. The prison environment did not help diminish this destructiveness, instead, it brought out the worst in me (as it does for many, if not most, prisoners). My awakening came slowly and it came despite prison bars and conditions that fostered anger, frustration, and distrust of authority. Ultimately, it was the civil rights attorneys, not the guards with riot batons, that convinced me that there was a better way to live. I met them while challenging prison conditions and each time, I marveled at the way they gave their help freely and with kindness. These people never voiced judgment about my behaviors, even though they certainly would have been justified in doing so a time or two. Rather than look down on me, they quietly and consistently demonstrated a high level of self-respect, and dignity. This is what I began to wish I had for myself. Gradually, I began to change because I had positive models to emulate.

While it is true that I was once Mean Al, it is also true that I was always capable of being a good neighbor and father, and a credit to the community.

I just needed some help. I think that help is a better approach, and I know an eleven-year-old girl who thinks so too. She has a purple bedroom.

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[1] Alvin L. Gilcrist is an ex-convict who has served more than thirty years in Washington State, and other prisons across the United States. He has been incarcerated two times. His second incarceration was the result of a parole violation. His most recent release was accompanied by participation in a Halfway House/Work Release program. After successful release into the community from the halfway house, the author maintained his employment and is now living with his wife and daughter in Vancouver, Washington.

[2] "Mean Al" was a moniker given to me by a Seattle newspaper columnist in the early 1970s. In the book CONCRETE MAMA, detailing day-to-day life inside the Washington State Penitentiary at Walla Walla in the late 1970s, it was said that a friend and I *ran* the prison, instigating rebellion and violence. ETHAN HOFFMAN & JOHN MCCOY, CONCRETE MAMA: PRISON PROFILES FROM WALLA WALLA 43-44 (1981).

[3] I was eventually captured on Camano Island, forty miles away from the escape site.

[4] This was so even though no one was injured and no weapons were involved.

[5] He had only part of the story. While the incident did result in another trial, complete with helicopters tracking my transport van, it also prompted the prison to install an operable toilet in the dungeon-like cell I had beaten my way out of.

[6] *See* Scott Sunde, *A Convict's Life Reaches A Crossroad*, SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER, Sept. 29, 1997, at B1.

[7] Back then, many in the criminal justice profession liked the idea that I would always be in a prison cell; in fact, many touted that my two life sentences were necessary for public safety, because I was such a bad a character.

[8] During those thirty-three years I met prisoners from both ends of the our nation's political extreme. In the early 1980s, I celled next door to James Earl Ray in Brushy Mountain Prison in Petros, Tennessee. In 1979 I met Rafael Miranda while confined at the United States Penitentiary in Marion, Illinois. As a result of my time, I know many of the prisoners who started the gangs that we now hear about every day, including the Aryan Brotherhood, the Mexican Mafia, the Crips, and the like.

[9] I was sent to the Washington State Reformatory in Monroe, Washington for armed robbery.

[10] I was originally given five years, but, because of activities during those years, which resulted in convictions for additional crimes, I did not get out of prison until 1991, almost nineteen years later.

[11] These violations were related to drugs and gun possession.

[12] Sunde, *supra* note 6.

[13] I do not want to sound preachy or moralistic. As I said, I have been a lousy citizen most of my life. Prisoners are their own worst witnesses because it always sounds so self-serving when they try to explain why they do the things they do. But it is we who know truly what we feel, and that knowledge should be shared.